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GILA LANDOWNERS DISCUSSING FREEWAY PROS, CONS

Betty Beard and Corinne Purtill, The Arizona Republic

Gila River Indian Community landowners and residents have begun a series of meetings to discuss the pros and cons of putting the South Mountain Freeway on the reservation.

The meetings are the latest indication that although the community remains officially opposed to the freeway, sentiment is growing to at least discuss it.

About 45 Gila River community landowners and residents met for about two hours Saturday on the reservation and agreed to a series of public hearings, said Nat Percharo, chairman of a group that represents owners of about 1,300 acres on the reservation south of Ahwatukee Foothills.

"We're putting our groundwork together to see if it (freeway) is worth going after," Percharo said. "There is no guarantee they (residents) would say yes or no. All we're trying to do is get a conception of how people feel about it."

When two Arizona Republic reporters appeared at the Saturday meeting, the group immediately voted to exclude outside media. Percharo said the hearings probably would be for Gila River Indian Community members only.

Gov. William Rhodes attended the meeting as a landowner. The Gila River Indian Community Council suspended him as governor for 21 days without pay on May 27 over allegations of abuse of power and improperly firing and hiring employees. He is attempting to build a hotel and other businesses on land he owns southeast of Interstate 10 and Riggs Road.

Sal DiCiccio, a former Phoenix councilman and developer, also attended the meeting. He declined to comment.

DiCiccio has been working with the community on a commercial project south of Pecos Road at 40th Street and another one near Maricopa.

The Gila River community remains officially opposed to allowing the freeway to be built on the reservation. A 2000 decision by the community's 17-member council prohibits even a study of the highway proposal. Also, there is stiff opposition in the community's District 6, which borders much of Ahwatukee Foothills.

Rhodes tried to get the council in May to agree to allow a public vote on a freeway feasibility study. Two council committees declined to forward the matter to the full council after some freeway opponents showed up.

Then Rhodes began looking into a citizens referendum petition that would need about 440 signatures to put the matter on the ballot. Percharo said he believes it's too early for a petition until it is determined how residents might feel.

On Tuesday morning, speaking before the Ahwatukee Foothills Chamber of Commerce, Arizona Department of Transportation spokesman Matt Burdick said the agency knows that some people in the Gila River administration are interested in the freeway.

Until the community delivers a consensus, however, the state has no choice but to respect the 2000 resolution and move forward with other plans.

"We still have time, but it's really their call," Burdick said. "The clock is definitely ticking."

CAPTION: Talk and more talk about South Mountain Freeway / Matt Burdick of the Arizona Department of Transportation

updates the Ahwatukee Foothills Chamber of Commerce on the South Mountain Freeway. The Gila River Indian Community appears more willing to talk about it, too. CAPTION: (1)Mark Wilson of Ahwatukee Foothills discusses traffic projections at an ADOT meeting on the proposed southern leg of Loop 202. CAPTION: (2)(From left) Andi Pettyjohn, Cheryl Hurd, Mark Deitchman and Mark Luccitti listen to an update on the South Mountain Freeway. CAPTION: Mapping the proposed South Mountain Freeway (See microfilm)

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